



Catholic History in Contemporary Cuban Society

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“There are still some governmental actors from that time alive today... so I can’t talk about the Catholic Church during the period you have requested,” Father Ricardo explained. It was a steamy July afternoon in Havana, Cuba and we were standing inside *La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen*, one of the city’s largest Catholic Churches. This Church was the third that I had visited and Father Ricardo was the sixth Catholic cleric that I had tried to interview that day.

I had recently arrived in Havana through the Gelfman International Summer Fund to conduct research for my senior thesis, which examines the relationship between the Catholic Church and the government in Cuba from 1959 to 1961. During this period, public relations between the Church and State quickly turned hostile. In 1961, the government forcibly expelled approximately two-thirds of Cuba’s Catholic clergy.

My preliminary research suggested that governmental laws that stripped the Church of its power in Cuban society drove this conflict. For my research, I planned to interview Cuban Catholics and to examine letters among Catholic priests in Church archives. However, when I tried to ask priests about my project they would not respond to my questions. I began to identify a common trend driving their refusals: fear. It was in their responses: “Sorry, your topic is a very tense one to discuss... .”

It is true that the Cuban government has softened its official stance towards the Catholic Church. Today, Cuban Catholics can openly practice their religion without fear of major public harassment. Despite these relatively recent developments, however, the majority of Cuban clerics were unwilling to speak about the Catholic Church in this era. Father Ricardo’s explanation clarified the reason behind their refusals. Listening to Father Ricardo, I was struck by history’s immense power to shape social memory. By keeping Cuban clerics extremely fearful of recounting their

interpretation of this period, the Cuban government is actively suppressing other narratives besides its own. Many Cubans have only heard the government's rendition of the Catholic Clergy as a foreign, pro-imperialist organization. This historical depiction shapes the Catholic Church's social role in Cuba today, as it is seen as foreign and disconnected from Cuban society.

Speaking with Lay Catholics and other Cubans led me to consider examining Church closures prior to the mass expulsion of clerics. Government-controlled news sources hardly mention this phenomenon. Additionally, many of the Churches that closed were smaller, rural buildings with less connection to the larger Cuban Catholic Church. This historical combination seems to have influenced a lack of scholarship on Church closures.

During my subsequent research in Miami, I discovered that closures of Churches during this period positively correlated with the number of Catholic school enrollees in that same region. This suggests that the Church was stripped of its power before the large expulsion of the Catholic clergy. After traveling to Cuba, I realize that my project may help to break the government's control of this history, making this work even more meaningful.